

Power Positioning Tips

Give Your Vocabulary a Power Boost

By Christine W. Zust, M.A.

Do you really listen to the words you use when you speak? My guess is that you don't. We get so used to hearing our own voices, we often forget the words we choose or their meaning. With a little effort, you can give your vocabulary a power boost, and in the process, position yourself as a knowledgeable professional.

Business professionals today “speak” in sound bytes. Time is money. Every second is precious. Here are a few tips to help you pack more punch into what you say:

Use simple words. Ask business people what they prefer when dealing with salespeople, and they will undoubtedly say, “Be direct, and give me the facts. Don't beat around the bush.” Some salespeople lose business because they talk around issues or they talk over their customers' heads. The customer comes away from a meeting asking, “What did that person say?” Be clear and concise. Choose your words carefully. Which word gets to the point faster? Parsimonious or stingy? One of my colleagues shared an example recently. Eager to have lunch served quickly at a business meeting, my friend asked the waiter to “expedite” the order. The confused waiter returned a few minutes later asking what the word meant. Speak in language that is appropriate to the listener. Words with five syllables or more can be more misunderstood than shorter words. Be careful you're not using those big words only to impress.

Be specific. Clients appreciate specific information that helps them understand what you are selling. It's better to say that your products are used by nurses, not workers in the healthcare industry. Information becomes clearer when you provide more details. Management team is more specific than work team. Fortune 500 CEOs is more descriptive than company leaders. Broad descriptions can sometimes defeat your sales purpose.

Use action verbs. Passive verbs simply state that you were, are, or will be doing something. Action verbs are direct and show motion. Let's look at an example. You are presenting to a potential client. You want to show your qualifications for handling the client's business, so you say, “I was the vice president of marketing for the Harper Company.” The sentence is weak because was is passive. By changing it to, “I directed the \$2 million marketing campaign for the Harper Company,” the sentence has more impact. It's easy to say, “I have 40 representatives working for me.” Want more power? Change it to, “I manage 40 representatives.”

Paint a picture with descriptive words. Let's say you are trying to sell a Palm Pilot to a customer. You could outline the features (data storage, easy access to information, compact size, direct download to your computer, etc.) or you could paint a visual picture outlining the benefits. “Imagine your desk is neat and clean. There is no in and out box. No stack of papers. Your desk is completely paper-free. The only tool you need is the new Palm Pilot XYZ.” The key starter word here is imagine. That one word encourages the listener to visualize what life would be like with a clean desk. You could say, “Try aromatherapy” or “Let the smell of the seashore fill the air.” Which is more descriptive?

Avoid jargon. In the 1980s and 1990s, professionals got stuck in the verbal “trend zone.” You have heard them all, and you have probably used them at one time or another. Paradigm shift. Empowerment. Interface. Awesome. Totally. Excellent. Whatever. You catch my drift? The problem with jargon is that it is overused and unoriginal. Don't use jargon as a crutch. Jargon is a sign of the times; it is not timeless. If you use jargon that is outdated, you risk positioning yourself as someone who is not in the know. Also, be careful you don't sound like a surfer dude or valley girl on those big account presentations.

Words help to shape our world. In the business world, you can change the perceptions of your clients and customers by choosing words that make your messages more powerful. You might make a few sales along the way too.

Christine W. Zust, M.A., is a communication expert and speaker who helps executive leaders and management teams develop credibility and clout with customers and key clients. She is president of Zust & Company, a Cleveland-based training, coaching and consulting firm, and can be reached at (440) 777-8373, or visit www.zustco.com.

© 2003 Zust & Company